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AUTHOR Ricard, Virginia B.
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ABSTRACT

Many degree programs for adults include a self-directed learning component to offer learners the opportunity to use mature skills in a flexible learning environment. Problems with making the self-directed component work may be the learning setting, learner attitudes, and fears of both skilled and less skilled adult learners. Some learner fears are best understood through a comparison of self-directed learning as carried out in formal and informal settings. Adult learners control their learning direction outside formal settings and share control within. The increased number of initiators within the formal setting often complicates the learning process, and learners may seek to clarify the roles of persons involved. Institutional credibility is strengthened by the provision of clear expectations and role definitions. The traditional grading process also presents barriers to the effective facilitation of self-directed learning. Other major areas of concern are how self-directed the program will be, how program expectations will be clarified for learners, program standards, and the program definition of self-directed learning. These fears must be recognized and dispelled to develop effective self-directed learning programs in formal settings. (YLB)

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Self-Directed Learning: Exploring the Fears

Virginia B. Ricard

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING: EXPLORING THE FEARS

The process isn't new. Self-Directed learners have been active and successful for a long time in informal learning settings. The dimensions and diversity of these efforts have been well documented by Tough (1971), the Commission on Non-Traditional Study (1974) and Gross (1977). The introduction of self-directed learning into formal learning settings is, however, relatively new and the work of Knowles (1975), while not restricted to formal settings, has aided this transition immeasurably.

In response to the recent influx of adult learners (and the promise of more in the future), colleges and universities across the U.S.A. have developed a variety of degree programs designed to attract mature learners. In general, these learners are experienced, working, self-directing (to greater or lesser degrees), and personally committed to family, career, or community. The majority have marked time constraints. In addition to the familiar adjustments of course schedules or sites for the convenience of the learners, many programs include a self-directed learning component. This component is usually provided to offer learners the opportunity to use mature skills in a flexible learning environment. The degree to which the component is emphasized may vary considerably from one program to another. Some programs with this component meet the needs of learners effectively; others flounder or fail.

Problems and Responses

Problems often surface in making the self-directed component of a program work successfully and barriers to progress frequently appear. In some learning settings, self-directed learners may be less active and less successful than in other learning settings. Recognized skills may not be used effectively and undeveloped or underdeveloped skills may not be identified. A process readily accepted and used by adults in one learning setting may be resisted or rejected in another. Frustrated learners and facilitators may strive to isolate causes of the problems and seek appropriate solutions.

Attitudes are often cited as interfering with the ability of learners to be self-directed. Attitude change and the development of self-directed learning skills may be suggested. Transition or orientation programs frequently focus on attitudes and skills as problem areas related to self-directed learning and to each other. These programs commonly ease the learner into the setting via a preparation period designed to help learners cope.

Although the relationship between attitudes and skill development or use is recognized, the role of fear is rarely addressed as a basis for particular learner attitudes.

The relationship of fear, anxiety, and tension to adult learning and motivation has been treated sensitively by Kidd (1975). Adult educators are aware of the potential anxieties related to testing, and studies focused on fear of success (Alper, 1973, 1974) or failure are well known. The fears of adult learners are not always easily identified, however; particularly in programs seeking to attract and retain mature, self-directed learners. Bothersome fears may be related to concerns less obvious than financial, scheduling or travel considerations. And fears related to self-directed learning are not necessarily restricted to skilled or less skilled adult learners. Program related fears may be widely distributed and evident as well on the part of facilitators, staff, faculty, or those responsible for institutional response to learners.

Fearful Issues

Conditions

When adult learners with well developed skills in self direction hesitate or refuse to use these skills in formal settings, their actions may be based on fear and the related issues should be identified and considered. When less endowed learners resist development of needed skills, the element of fear should be considered. When facilitators, faculty, staff, or others involved in self-directed learning programs in formal settings function with difficulty or reluctance or withold program support needed by the learner, the element of fear should be confronted.

Concerns

The fears of persons responsible for developing self-directed programs in formal settings are typically related to program costs, standards and policies, program

administration, or methods of adapting structures to adult learner needs. The fears of learners are diverse and may not parallel institutional priorities, but learner fears are similar; focused primarily on institutional credibility and learner roles; standards, grades, or costs.

Understanding

Some learner fears are best understood through a comparison of self-directed learning as carried out in formal and informal settings.

Informal Settings

The self-directed learner in an informal setting designs, implements, and evaluates learning. The learner decides what is to be learned; how, when, where and with whom the learning will take place; the period of time it will last, how often it will occur, and what the learning is worth. The learner initiates tasks that may vary from the simple to the complex on a self-paced basis related to personal needs and interests or learning style. Learning by doing, in an experiential environment, the learner is also free to seek and to directly apply theoretical content. The learner's resources include people, places or things in formal, informal, individual or group settings as diverse as the learner desires. The learner establishes the level or degree of self-directedness required for the learning tasks and the level of performance desired.

Formal Settings

Although self-directed learning programs in formal settings vary considerably and institutional practices differ, institutions ordinarily establish policies regarding what is to be learned, the related conditions, and letter-values or worth of the learning. Learners, facilitators, program staff, faculty, or administrators participate in these related discussions to varying degrees, as roles, institutional flexibility, or limitations allow. They may or may not be skilled in applying principles of adult teaching and learning in general; the design, implementation, and facilitation of self-directed learning programs in formal settings in particular. Learning tasks may vary from the simple to the complex with limitations typically on self-pacing. Attention is usually directed toward the personal needs and interests of learners, with less attention to learning

styles and more to curriculum content or emphasis on identified resources. The institution establishes the level or the degree of self-directedness required for the learning tasks and may or may not involve the learner in establishing levels of performance.

Institutional Credibility and Role of the Learner

Adult learners control their learning direction outside formal settings and share control within. The increased number of "initiators" within the formal setting often complicates the learning process and aware learners may seek to clarify the roles of persons involved. From the learner's point of view, most learning in informal settings has been different from learning in formal school or college settings. The real questions for the learner may be: "When an institution offers self-directed learning, is it the process I know or is it different? If different, how? What will be expected of me? Will it be worth my time, effort and money?"

These questions may not be asked. Frequently, the doubts of learners surface simply but no less directly.

> A learner, considering registration in an adult program at the university, stopped to discuss program details with a staff member. She was enthusiastic and posed the usual questions regarding the purpose, content and structure of the program; persons, roles and cost. She brightened at the staff member's description of self-directed learning and the program's efforts to individualize; the prospect of an opportunity to meet her own needs. Smiling, eyes lowered, she looked up suddenly. Then, soberly, she asked "Do you really mean it?"

This learner's question is typical of others phrased differently but related to the issue of institutional credibility: "Will I and my needs be taken seriously here? Will I be allowed to learn?

Being "allowed" to learn may mean different things to adult learners: being able to apply information to practical need areas in the living or job environment; using a preferred learning style; thinking through or performing learning tasks differently; developing or presenting learning products in a variety of ways. Inexperienced facilitators who "take over" learner responsibilities or fail to support where support is needed may complicate the learning process.

Institutional credibility is strengthened by the provision of clear expectations and role definitions; respect for the abilities of and demonstrated commitment to

meeting the needs of adult learners.

Grades

In formal settings, anxious expressions of doubt may be linked to the role of grades. Typically an institutional requirement, adult learners may or may not feel the need for grades and frequently view the grading process as interfering with learning process. "Do you really mean it?" may be followed by other questions related to grades and grading, if the learner feels free to verbalize thoughts and feelings: "Is it really OK for me to set goals, identify resources, evaluate and plan here? Suppose I don't finish on time? What happens if I miss a class or can't take the course when it is offered? Will you accept or reject what I decide and do? Will what I decide and do here be worth as much as what you identify or decide for me? Where do I really fit into the evaluation picture? Because a grade must be given and you must submit it, will I have an equal chance at an "A"? If I know more about a topic than you or my skills are more highly developed than yours, how will you react? If I'm not working toward a degree, will I be able to take the course(s)?" Learners seeking credentials may simply submerge most questions concretely in a single, realistic thought or statement: "I must have the right grades to get the degree (the diploma, certificate, credit, etc.) so tell me what you (the institution, the facilitator) want me to do and I'll do it." The effective facilitation of self-directed learning around the barriers presented by the traditional grading process is a challenge faced by all persons involved in self-directed learning programs. The needs of the institution and the self-directed learner must be effectively met.

Expectations

Adult learners might never have paused to reflect on the process but most have experienced self-directed learning and like the results (Cross, 1981). Pragmatic, the majority select practical or problem-centered projects when given a chance (Knowles, 1980; Cross, 1981). The related questions of how self-directed a program will be and how program expectations will be clarified for learners are major areas of concern for learners and others involved in adult program development. Learners may rightly ask

institutions offering self-directed learning programs to clarify the degree to which they will tell the learner HOW.

Standards

The issue of program standards may be a major source of anxiety for skilled and less skilled learners alike. Questions related to the establishment of program standards focus on who shall be involved and how. Whether the program is viewed as "an easy way to get through quickly and painlessly" or one of "quality". Whether the program is "chaotic", lacking order and control or "directioned and organized". "Does self-directed learning really have a place in higher education? Will the credit be worth as much or more than other programs? How will I know?" In graduate and undergraduate programs the question of quality levels must be answered.

Program Definition- Self-Directed Learning

Learner fears are reflected in their attitudes toward self-directed learning in the formal setting and may also relate to their understanding of the meaning of the term. Questions raised regarding learner, facilitator and institutional roles are usually tied directly or indirectly to the definition of self-directed learning. SELF directed in the informal setting, learners seek clarification regarding the degree to which they will be self DIRECTED in the formal setting. For learners and others alike, part of the problem may be general lack of knowledge. Knowledge regarding what self-directed learning is, who does it, when, where and how. Another part of the problem centers on the issue of commitment to the concept of self-directed learning. Knowing and understanding what self-directed learning is all about does not necessarily mean acceptance of the concept. Acceptance implies belief in the ability of adults to initiate and carry out their own learning to varying degrees and movement toward independence and interdependence in the learning setting rather than dependence. Acceptance implies willingness to become knowledgeable and skilled; realistically flexible in applying the principles of self-directed learning in formal and informal settings. Acceptance implies belief not only in a "place" for the approach in higher education, but the increasing necessity for self-directed learning as an option in the development of mature learners. The learning process may be

complicated when learners, facilitators or others involved in programs do not register commitment to the concept of self-directed learning.

The Present and the Future

We have come a long way and they are here: self-directed learning programs, learners and facilitators. But there is much work to be done. Like it or not, self-directed learning programs in formal learning settings are not always perceived as credible in the eyes of the learner-beholder. Standards continue to be questioned as institutional barriers threaten the quality and development of self-directed programs. Adults outside formal learning settings continue to design, plan and implement programs; teach, organize and supervise people; manage time, money, homes, jobs, illness and families; yet withold or lay most of these learned skills to rest as they enter the formal setting. Others, willing to sharpen required skills, do not always find the necessary help or clearly defined institutional expectations. Expressions of doubt, apprehension or confusion continue to be viewed as inability of learners (or others related to programs) to cope without an examination of the underlying causes or fears. Lack of understanding regarding the meaning and nature of self-directed learning, necessary skills, knowledge of roles and resources or standards of excellence pose barriers to program success. Fear becomes a more conscious feeling than confidence for all concerned; particularly the learners. Without confidence, learners cannot proceed successfully in self-directed learning programs.

Today's adult learners, with their preferences for problem-centered learning and inductive processes, may require more self-directed settings. Allen (1982) has described changes anticipated in graduate education and the relationship of these changes to self-directed and lifelong learning. Conditions will need to be more favorable and effective for learners who may already be well educated, experienced professionals with at least one career. Learning approaches originally developed for 18-23 year olds as a group may not be adequate for 34 + year olds as individuals. In some instances, self-directed learning programs may be a necessary alternative. Indeed, the times may require self-directed learning(Wedemeyer, 1981). Although the day may be distant when researchers

link specific characteristics of adult learners to adult learning strategies, Knox(1977) urges awareness of individual preferences and approaches so that supportive alternatives might be provided. Creative and effective alternatives to meeting learner needs are often seen as threats to educational quality; but creative and effective alternatives must be provided if educational quality is to be preserved. Learners, facilitators and institutions must work to be free of the fears that continue to block self-directed learning progress in formal learning settings. This means recognizing major fears and their sources with demonstrated willingness to correct deficiencies. If action is delayed, learning maturity will continue to be absent, even as mature learners are increasingly present in the classroom. Actual outcomes of learning will continue to require the coping skills of learners as the intended outcomes remain unachieved. Adult learners will be dependent in formal learning settings, even as they are independent and interdependent outside.

Conclusion

It is possible to design and develop effective self-directed learning programs in formal settings and they exist. The need to dispel fears as barriers to success, however, remains. If this accomplishment is to be realized, identification and correction of the causes is implied. The key question of the degree to which persons involved know and understand the meaning of self-directed learning, are committed to the concept as an alternative and skilled in its practice with adults must be resolved. Corrective action must be focused on:

1. Commitment to the concept of self-directed learning for adults.
2. Learner needs, interests and learning styles.
3. Knowledge, understanding and skills in self-directed learning theory and practice.
4. Clarification of program levels of self-directedness; degrees of flexibility and limitations.
5. Program standards of excellence; evaluation and maintenance.
6. On-going skill building directed toward learning how to learn or to facilitate, in addition to the specified content areas.

Decisions to use or not to use self-directed learning skills should be based on the learner's option to select a quality program rather than on fearful issues related to programs. If institutions are to effectively support the self-directed learning efforts of adults, they have a responsibility to avoid adversely affecting the process.

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